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ABSTRACT

People have strong ideas about children growing up with a second or third language. These ideas influence how they look at other people's children, and influence how professionals such as teachers, doctors, and speech therapists advise parents of children growing up bilingually. This digest seeks to dispel some of the myths about children growing up bilingually and offers suggestions that can help children become fluent users of two or more languages. The following issues are addressed: (1) a bilingual environment is most often a necessity, not a choice; (2) hearing two or more languages in childhood is not a cause of language disorder or language delay; (3) children's use of two languages within one sentence is not a sign of confusion; and (4) children do not just "pick up" a language; they need a strongly supportive and rich environment. Recommendations for parents, resources for bilingual families, and resources on bilingualism and bilingual acquisition, are included. (VWL)

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Two or More Languages in Early Childhood

Some General Points and Practical Recommendations

ANNICK DE HOUWER, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP AND SCIENCE FOUNDATION OF FLANDERS, BELGIUM

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Two or More Languages in Early Childhood

Some General Points and Practical Recommendations

ANNICK DE HOUWER, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP AND SCIENCE FOUNDATION OF FLANDERS, BELGIUM

In an increasingly diversified and multilingual world, more and more young children find themselves in an environment where more than one language is used. Similarly, with job changes that involve moving to different parts of the world, parents can feel overwhelmed by the linguistic demands on them and their children. What can parents expect of their children? Do parents have anything to contribute to the process of early language development? Does it confuse children to learn two or more languages at once? Do children have to be especially intelligent to be able to cope with more than one language?

People everywhere have strong ideas about children growing up with a second or third language. These ideas influence how people interact with their children and how they look at other people's children. These ideas also influence how professionals such as teachers, doctors, and speech therapists advise parents of children growing up bilingually. Sadly, many ideas that people have about children growing up with a second or third language in childhood are not of any benefit to these children and may in fact have adverse effects. One of the purposes of this digest is to dispel some common myths about children growing up bilingually and to offer suggestions that can help children to become fluent users of two or more languages.

A bilingual environment is most often a necessity, not a choice

Many discussions of the advantages or disadvantages of early bilingualism seem to be based on the idea that a bilingual environment is something that parents choose for their children. This, however, is usually not the case; young children growing up bilingually are for the most part doing so because there is no way that they can grow up monolingually. For example, it may be the case that the child interacts regularly with monolingual individuals, some of whom speak one language (e.g., teachers and classmates who speak only Italian), others of whom speak another (e.g., parents who speak only French). Other children may grow up in a community where most people speak the same two languages on a day-to-day basis. The usage rules for these languages determine when a particular language is spoken. Imposing changes in these conventions so that all bilingual speakers in the child's social world would limit themselves to one and the same language in all circumstances is not only impossible but also ethically dubious, because it would infringe on individuals' linguistic rights.

Hearing two or more languages in childhood is not a cause of language disorder or language delay

All over the Western world, there are speech therapists and medical doctors who advise parents of young children growing up with more than one language to stop using one of those languages with their children. Typically, the language to be given up is the language that is not used in the overall environment. For example, speech therapists in the United States often suggest that parents stop using Spanish at home in favor of English, while speech therapists in Flanders may advise parents to stop speaking English in favor of Dutch. The common reason for this advice is twofold. First, it is often claimed that hearing two or more languages will confuse the child and lead to grave problems in acquiring language. Second, it is claimed that the acquisition of the main language of the environment will stand a better chance without competition from the other language. However, there is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition. Many, many children throughout the world grow up with two or more languages from infancy without showing any signs of language delays or disorders. These children provide visible proof that there is no causal relationship between a bilingual environment and language learning problems. In addition, there is no scientific evidence that giving up one language automatically has a beneficial effect on the other. In fact, the abrupt end of the use of the home language by a child's parents may lead to great emotional and psychological difficulties both for the parents and for the child. After all, language is strongly linked to emotion, affect, and identity. A 3-year-old whose mother suddenly stops talking to her in the language familiar to her, particularly if her mother does not respond to the things she says to her in that language, may make the child feel emotionally abandoned and totally lost. Speech therapists who advise monolingualism should then not be surprised to find that the child in question starts to exhibit troubling behavior. Should the child recover from this traumatic experience, there is no evidence that progress in the main language of the environment is helped by the loss of the home language. In fact, it has been shown in educational settings that building on a child's skills in a first language helps the acquisition of a second one.

Children's use of two languages within one sentence is not a sign of confusion

Often, it is claimed that small children who are learning to speak two languages go through a stage of mixing and confusing the two. The use of words from both languages in a single sentence is cited as evidence that the child cannot distinguish between the two languages, but in reality, this is not a sign of confusion. In fact, it has been shown that the use of two languages in one sentence by mature bilinguals reveals a great deal of linguistic skill (Romaine, 1995). It is also true that, while young bilingual children sometimes use words from two languages in the same sentence, they produce far more sentences using only one language.

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This clearly shows that they are able to keep their languages separate.

The question then becomes, in what circumstances do children use words from both languages in the same sentence? They do it only when talking to people that they know can understand both languages and who do not get upset with them for using such sentences. In other words, the social context in which children find themselves determines whether and to what extent they use more than one language in a single sentence. The same happens with bilingual adults; they use words from two languages in the same sentence only in sociolinguistic settings in which it is appropriate.

Children do not just "pick up" a language: They need a strongly supportive and rich environment

A prevailing idea is that it is very easy for children to learn a new language and that hardly any effort is involved. However, learning language, even one, is a process that takes many years. Languages are very complex. To learn all their complexities, one needs a lot of life experience. It may not take very long to learn how to carry on a simple conversation (although it does take monolingual children approximately 3 years before they can carry on an intelligible conversation with strangers), but it takes a lot more time to be able to develop the skill to give a formal speech. The environment plays an important role in learning to speak. Children learn to speak only when they hear people talk to them in many different circumstances. Language development in the early stages depends crucially on vocabulary knowledge. The more words children know, the better they will learn to speak and the better their chances of doing well in school. Book reading is an excellent source of help in the acquisition of vocabulary. Book reading in any language, even when a baby can hardly sit up yet, plays a highly supportive role not only in the learning of language but also in the emotional bonding between child and parent. Furthermore, it is an activity that is viewed in many cultures as appropriate for both mothers and fathers to engage in, and it is an excellent way of introducing children to aspects of culture that they may not see in their local environment.

Recommendations for parents

Because language in the first 10 years of life is such an important basis for the achievement of academic and social skills, it is no luxury to reflect a little more on just what elements play an important role in learning a language, whether it is one, two, or more. Although it is not possible here to spell out all the things that parents should consider when their child is in a situation where he or she could learn to speak more than one language, the brief list of pointers below offers some assistance. My advice to parents would be not to stop at this brief article but to read some of the material listed in the resource section. Investing in a child's bilingualism or multilingualism, after all, should yield a high return. Here are a few basic points that are important in raising children with more than one language:

- Do what comes naturally to you and your family in terms of which language(s) you use when, but make sure your children hear both (or all three or four) languages frequently and in a variety of circumstances. Create opportunities for your children to use all of the languages they hear. Read books to and with your children in each of the languages that are important to their lives.

- Talk to all your children in the same way—not, for instance, using one language with the elder and another language with the younger. Language is tied to emotions, and if you address your children in different languages, some of your children may feel excluded, which in turn might adversely affect their behavior.

- Avoid abrupt changes in how you talk to your children, especially when they are under 6. Don't suddenly decide to speak French to them if you have only been using English. In this respect, beware of "experts" (e.g., doctors, teachers) who tell you to stop speaking a particular language to your child.

- If you feel strongly about your children using one particular language with you, encourage them to use it in all of their communication with you. Try to discourage their use of another language with you by asking them to repeat what they said in the preferred language or by gently offering them the appropriate words in the language you want them to use. It is no more cruel than asking your child to say "please" before giving her a cookie.

- Do not make language an issue, and do not rebuke or punish children for using or not using a particular language. If you feel your child is not talking as he or she should in the preschool years, have a hearing test done, even if teachers or doctors tell you that bilingualism is the cause of any language delays. Whatever else, follow your own intuition about what is best for you and your family.

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This Digest is a revised version of an article that appeared in *AILA News* (volume 1, number 1), the newsletter of the International Association of Applied Linguistics. It was prepared with a very general audience in mind. The author invites discussion, questions, and comments from anyone, but especially from colleagues who have carried out research on bilingual children. Please write to Dr. Annick De Houwer, PSW—UIA, Universiteitsplein 1, 2610 Antwerpen, Belgium.

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